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AUTHOR Bachmann, James K.
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ABSTRACT

Nonverbal communication is important in foreign language teaching and learning because of its variation in form, meaning and distribution from one culture to another and because of its extensive use in the communicative process. Cross-cultural misunderstandings result from incorrect interpretations of the tone of voice, body motions, facial expressions, and the distances used when people communicate face-to-face. These misinterpretations are not obvious, and probably are not as rare as most people might assume, since they often occur below the level of awareness. Therefore, both teaching and testing procedures should allow for nonverbal communication. Dialogs can include gestures which can be either demonstrated by the teacher or shown on film and videotape. Varying tones of voice can be used to indicate emotions just as vocabulary is used by writers to express their attitudes toward their subjects. Teachers can thus add life to the printed words in their textbooks and stimulate student interest and motivations. (Author)

English Face to Face: The Non-verbal Dimension of Conversation

James K. Bachmann

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Communication, as a language teaching objective, has been receiving increased attention in the TESOL profession. Clifford Prator published an article in Allen's first edition of Teaching English as a Second Language, saying that the most promising area for progress in TESOL was not transformational grammar, not programmed instruction, but communication. Since then several articles on communication have been published in the professional journals, including one by Palmer in the IRAL on a communication-based test. There was also enough apparent interest in the subject of communication to warrant a workshop at this convention.

Since the term communication is becoming so widely used, it needs to be analyzed. Communication can take place not only verbally through the phonology, grammar, and lexicon of language, but non-verbally through such kinesic features as gestures and facial expressions, proxemic features such as eye contact, directness of facing, voice loudness, physical distance between speakers, and touching, and paralinguistic features broadly referred to as tone of voice.

These kinds of non-verbal communication, I feel, should receive increased attention in TESOL because of their cross cultural variability (which when pointed out should prove motivating to students), and because of their potentially vital communicative importance in face-to-face interaction.

Some of my own experiences, and anecdotes I have heard from others, illustrate the vital role that non-verbal communication (NVC) can play in a conversational situation.

1. Clifford Prator, "English as a Second Language: Teaching," in Harold B. Allen, ed., Teaching English as a Second Language, New York: McGraw Hill, 1965, pp. 87-92.

An anecdote illustrating kinesics across cultures involved a student from India I was interviewing in my office at Colorado State University. When we had just about concluded our interview I asked if he understood clearly the time and place of the EFL classes. When he shook his head laterally, I thought he did not understand, but he indicated verbally that he did when I started to explain again. . He arrived at the correct time and place for his first class, but throughout the course, when I looked for the familiar nods of understanding from my students, I was faced with a negative-looking head signal.

Proxemics is another area that has involved me in misunderstandings. Not long ago my Puerto Rican wife and I were discussing a problem I've long since forgotten. I do remember, however, that she interrupted the conversation to tell me I wasn't paying attention. Insisting that I was, I repeated her last few statements word for word. When I asked why she thought I wasn't listening she replied: "Well, you weren't looking at me, so how could you be listening?" Even the fact that I could repeat what she had said didn't seem to make her feel much better; only when I looked at her eyes did she seem at ease again.

Paralinguistics, too, poses its problems for the unwary when tone of voice is misinterpreted. I remember asking a former student of mine, a Portuguese speaker, to leave the classroom for what I regarded as an insulting tone of voice when she answered a question. I found out later to my embarrassment that her intonation was that of a polite statement in her native language. Since then I've been extremely reluctant to assign any special meaning to the tone of voice of foreign students speaking English.

Even among speakers of the same language these NVC signals can cause communication breakdowns. Several of my linguistics students have told me that their roommates will insist that they, my students, are angry or depressed when

they are not. What usually happens is that in the ensuing argument the person does get angry so the roommate thinks he has proven his point.

Across dialects, the NVC signals also vary. Kenneth Johnson, a researchor in Black English, tells the story of black junior high school students who avoided direct eye contact in order to show respect when telling the truth, but looked directly at him when they were lying. "If he looks you in the eye,"said Johnson, "you had better check it out."

While the evidence so far for the cultural variability and communicative importance of NVC has been anecdotal, an experiment by Michael Watson in Proxemics, the study of filmed interviews by Ray Birdwhistell, and a classification study by George Trager also based on filmed interview analysis, provide more thorough substantiation.

Watson conducted his experiment at the University of Colorado to observe and quantify the effects of proxemic variables among foreign students. The variables he tested and quantified were axis, closeness, touch, visual, and voice loudness.

Axis refers to the directness of facing, whether directly at the interlocutor at one extreme, or turning the back to the interlocutor at the other. Periodic observations were made of two male subjects of the same cultural background interacting in a specially arranged observation room.

Arabs, Latins, and Southern Europeans, labeled the "contact culture group" were considerably lower in their mean scores than the "non-contact" culture group consisting of the Americans (who were actually tested in a separate experiment but were used for comparison) Asians, Indians-Pakistani, and finally the Northern Europeans, whose body positions faced each other the least directly as they were seated at a table. The comparisons across groups were all significant. [1]

1. O. Michael Watson, Proxemic Behavior: A Cross-Cultural Study, The Hague: Mouton, 1970, p. 78.

For degree of physical closeness between speakers, differences between the Northern Europeans and the contact group members were all significant, and Americans were far more distant in their interactions than any of the other groups.[1] This measure may help to explain why contact culture people (except the Indians Pakistani, who did not follow the pattern) may feel uncomfortable when interacting with Americans, who could seem to be maintanining too great a distance.

Touching was found to be infrequent with all groups during the experiment. Still, differences between contact and non-contact groups were reported to be significant when each culture type was taken as a whole, i.e the scores were lumped together. [2]

The visual measure supported the contact vs. non-contact division of the groups in that all measures across group types were reported as significant. Americans had the least amount of eye contact.[3]

In the last measure, voice loudness, the figures showed that Americans, contrary to the impression they may give elsewhere, were by no means the loudest of the groups measured, at least under these controlled circumstances. Asians, Northern Europeans, and Southern Europeans all rated louder than Americans, and the Indians-Pakistani were rated at about the same level. [4]

The Watson experiment would appear to have several limitations. First, the participants were aware that they were being observed, so that their behaviour might have been affected. Second, the numbers involved are small, ranging from 10 to 20, except for the Northern Europeans who numbered 32.

1. Ibid., p. 79.
2. Ibid., p. 80.
3. Ibid , p. 81.
4. Ibid., p. 82.

Third, only males were used in the experiment; females might vary considerably for these measures. Finally there were significant differences in degree of friendship between Arabs and North rn Europeans, so that some of the results might have been influenced by that factor.

In spite of these limitations, the Watson experiment would seem to support the view that these proxemic aspects of NVC are culturally determined rather than universal or natural, and thus will vary from one cultural group to another.

The importance of NVC lies also in its extensive use in the communicative process. "Our present guess is that in pseudostatistics probably no more than 30 to 35 per cent of the social meaning of a conversation or an interaction is carried by the words," estimates Ray Birdwhistell, a pioneer in the study of kinesics.[1] The estimate is "pseudostatistical" since it is not based on counting communication units, since Birdwhistell admits he knows of none which are valid for all systems and subsystems of communication, but on more than 25 years spent studying kinesics and communication. No movement, he feels he can assume, is without potential meaning in the context in which it occurs.[2]

While it has not yet been proven how much of face-to-face communication is non-verbal, Birdwhistell's writings suggest that much more of it might be non-verbal than we think. He shows how a substantial part of NVC is redundant, i.e. carried simultaneously through verbal and non-verbal channels. Kinesics or body motion adds to the redundancy already present in language, thus enabling messages to be understood although only part of it is received, as is often the case when foreign students are learning English. Past tense, for example, is shown by films to be often accompanied by a backward movement of some part of the body, and future tense by a forward movement. Pluralization, according to

1. Ray L. Birdwhistell, Kinesics and Context, Philadelphia: Univ. of Penna. Press, 1970, p. 158.
2. Ibid., p. 183

can be redundantly indicated by a sweeping motion, so that a word like "we" could be signalled both verbally and non-verbally. In addition, area markers for prepositions consist of pointing motions for words like behind or under. [1]

Negative are also signalled kinesically, sometimes without awareness. I have observed faculty members during Masters examinations give away the answers to their questions by nodding or shaking their heads. In parts of Latin America, it is not the head that one shakes but the index finger.

Stresses and pauses, too, are seen to have kinesic correlates. Five different meanings for the two word phrase forty fives can be indicated linguistically by stress, pitch, and juncture; and kinesically by eyeblinks, nods, head and foot movements, and pauses in all these body movements. [2]

Birdwhistell also gives an interesting analysis of the overall communication situation. Since NVC can occur simultaneously with speech, more than one person at a time can be communicating, although only one is speaking. In a conversational situation one might suppose that the speaker is the one who is communicating and that the listeners are not. By analyzing films of people interacting, Birdwhistell shows that the most realistic model for a communication situation would be a multisensory one where potential communication is going on all the time. Even when no one is saying anything, proxemics and kinesics are involved in sending out messages.[3]

The assumption that something is being signalled all the time in an interaction is accompanied by the more difficult problem of the meaning of the signals. Birdwhistell insists on full context before suggesting the particular meaning of the thousands of possible gestures and facial expressions. He has refused to

1. Ibid., pp. 123-124.
2. Ibid., p. 130, ..."Forty numerals of the shape of five, ...Forty, not thirty, fives, ... Forty fives, not sixes, ... Guns of a particular caliber, ... Forty-five caliber, not forty-six caliber."
3. Ibid., p. 220.

make a dictionary of gestures because the meanings vary so much according to context. A smile, for example, could indicate anything from friendliness to flirtation to nervousness, depending on who does it to whom and under what conditions.

Birdwhistell's point of caution is well taken. Perhaps the most useful conclusion for the layman to make about NVC signals is that we often don't know what they mean unless we are thoroughly familiar with the cultures and subcultures in which they function. It might well be prudent then to wait for verbal confirmation before jumping to conclusions about kinesics across cultures or subcultures.

In addition to the experiment by Watson and the film analysis by Birdwhistell, the third source of evidence for the communicative importance of NVC comes from the filmed interview analyses done by George Trager including the vocal features which accompany, but are not strictly a part of language. Other than the natural voice features indicating age and sex, paralinguistic signals like overloudness, oversoftness, overhigh and overlow pitch, drawling and clipping, whispering and word substitutes like uh huh and tsk tsk all carry meaning in English, but not necessarily the same meaning in other languages, as my experience with the apparently insulting tone of voice of my Brazilian student indicated.

Trager does not refer to all the words we call interjections under the heading of paralanguage, but expressions he lists such as mmm and ha suggest that interjections might well be considered in connection with paralinguistics. By way of example, an acquaintance of mine was recovering in a hospital from a recent operation. As she was being helped by two nurses to walk a few steps from her bed, she exclaimed "ay." One of the nurses, thinking that my friend wanted to walk without help, i.e. that the patient was saying "I can do it," let go of her so that she nearly collapsed. The nurse had to grasp her again quickly, making it an even more painful experience. That seemed to be a

hard way to learn to say ouch in English. She says she doesn't say anything to indicate pain any more because ouch has no meaning to her as a speaker of Spanish.

What about the implications of NVC for language teaching? A conference at Indiana University in 1966 brought together linguists, language teachers, psychologists, and anthropologists to discuss how NVC relates to language teaching. Alfred Hays suggested that sentences could be presented in several ways paralinguistically so that students could distinguish them from utterances free from any special feeling or emotion. He noted a Russian actor who could say the Russian words for "this evening" in forty different ways paralinguistically most of which could be correctly identified by native speakers for emotional overtones- fear, determination, happiness, boredom, etc.[1] Experimental evidence would be useful to determine to what degree non-native speakers misinterpret the intended emotions.

Speaking on kinesics at the Indiana Conference, Birdwhistell objected to the idea that it be formally taught, maintaining that imitation should be sufficient, and that there was no point in making students appear to be more like native speakers than they actually are, i.e. such efforts might result in the students being judged insincere and affected.[2]

In the communications workshop held at this TESOL conference, it was recommended that a worthwhile learning goal for students would be to recognize and be able to use appropriate gestures and facial expressions for a given situation, as well as appropriate distance between speakers.

My own recommendations would be as follows:

1. That aural comprehension tests include also the visual dimension, which is

1. Thomas A. Sebeok ed., Approaches to Semiotics, p. 156.
2. Ibid., p. 188.

present in most ordinary vocal communication situations except telephone calls and radio listening. The test could be given on film instead of on tape, or the items could be acted out live in front of the students. Negatives, difficult to hear for many foreign students, might then be picked up through the visual channel. Question forms might also be identified by eyebrow movement as well as by grammar and intonation.

2. That aural comprehension tests include questions about the speakers' emotional state- surprised, bored, etc. I would suggest this since reading tests often ask about the author's attitude toward his subject.

3. That dialogs should be acted out rather than read by the teacher. In addition to modeling the sounds, the teacher has the opportunity to model the paralinguistics, kinesics, and proxemics, preferably with another live native speaker, but possibly with a tape recorder where the teacher models first one speaker's part, and then the other.

4. That films be used for teaching NVC. Short films played several times with a sound track could be replayed without the sound while the students supply the vocal parts of the dialogs. Teachers could call the students' attention to the gestures and facial expressions used on the film.

5. That role playing be used to provide situations where appropriate gestures, facial expressions, and distances can be put into practice.

As literate people, teachers can and should stress the value of verbal communication. As communication facilitators, however, teachers should not overlook the vast amount of culturally coded information continually being sent out through the non-verbal channels and inseparably connected with the verbal message. The meaning may be as much in what is seen as in what is said. Sometimes, as McCluhan has observed, "The medium is the message."

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